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A COWARD'S STAIRS

Continued from page 7

—our score will be paid. I shall not miss you, Beatrice; and I shall not miss myself afterward."

"I was afraid that he would hear me shiver."

"Mercy!" she screamed in a low whisper. "Mercy!"

"Be quiet!" he commanded.

"She was quiet, very quiet. It was I who almost screamed. I held myself for fear my trembling should be audible."

"What was I to do? What could I do? If I could have got straight over him, I might have dropped a chair or a heavy box on his head. I thought of that; but he stood, not under the balcony, but at the foot of the stairs. If I went down he would shoot me as well as her. I knew I ought to go and be shot; but the thought of the revolver seemed to paralyze me, and I could not move. I dug my nails into my flesh; but that did not make me move. My senses seemed asleep. I did not even hear what they said for a time, though I saw that they were speaking; but at last her voice broke in upon me, as if I had suddenly awoke."

"I am so young!" she pleaded. "So young! I don't want to die! I don't want—to—die!"

I SUPPOSE nobody is such a coward that *nothing* will stir him to risk his wretched life. Her piteous voice stirred me. I decided that I would go to her, if I threw myself down the stairs, just to be shot; but I wanted to save her. I forced myself to think.

"It was now nine minutes to two. At the end of those nine minutes she was to die. If I could not save her, I must die too. I must find some weapon and go down stealthily and try to catch him unawares. Even if he heard me and turned my way, she would have a chance to escape while he killed me. She was nearly as quick as he. I looked round and saw some golf clubs standing in a corner of the corridor. I crept to them and selected one. I took off my slippers to walk quietly over the thick carpet, hoping to surprise him from behind, as he stood back to the stairs. I thought it all out, to the accompaniment of her pleading for life. Her voice seemed to draw me toward her, and my fears seemed to draw me back. Her voice prevailed slowly, very slowly. If I had not been a coward, I must have run to her. There were only six minutes left, when I came to the top of the stairs."

"You will think me a coward of cowards. I lingered there for a whole minute. My limbs would not move. I tried to picture myself rushing on him and striking him down before he turned; but another picture always came in my mind instead. I imagined a betraying look on her face, or perhaps she screamed at the sight of me, and then he turned, and the revolver blazed. I tried to picture myself missed and rushing on and felling him; but instead I saw the four aces blotted out one after the other—snip—snip—snip—snip! I counted the steps, twenty-four: ten to the turning, and fourteen beyond. I feel as if I shall go on counting them for the rest of my life—a coward's stairs!"

"Five minutes more," he said, "and then—death!"

"Death!" I took one step down the stairs; then counted. Twenty-three more!

"Death!" she repeated and shivered. She had sunk into a chair, and her face was in her hands. That was why she did not see me.

"I took another step—twenty-two more! If she did not look up and scream, he would not be likely to see me till I turned the corner, at any rate. Twenty-one!"

"Death!" The word seemed to reëcho in my mind and to freeze me still. I couldn't move. She gave a faint sob, and that sent me a step forward. Twenty! Nineteen! I heard my own step even on the soft carpet. If he should hear!

"Have you anything more to say?" he asked. Under cover of his voice I took another step.

"Give me a chance," she begged, "just a little chance!"

"He laughed. The laugh covered another step. 'A tiny chance! You were always—a sport!' He laughed almost aloud; and I took two steps more. Fifteen!"

"I am a woman, only a woman!"

"I wish," he said, "that you were a man! Then I wouldn't just shoot you." He snarled like an angry dog. My cowardly limbs were numb again. "I wish you were a man!" he repeated. His voice seemed to root me to the ground.

"She sobbed. I went on. Fourteen! I was at the corner now; and if he looked round—How quickly he hit those four aces—snip—snip—snip—snip!"

"She sobbed again. Thirteen! He had only to glance round—and I should die."

"If you were a man," he said—his voice was worse than brutal—devilish, animal—"I'd do more than shoot you!"

"Twelve! Death was such a fearful thing—the darkness—and what? I followed my coffin in imagination, and my soul—I couldn't do it!"

"A little longer!" she pleaded. "I am afraid!" Eleven! "For mercy's sake! I am afraid!" Ten! "I am afraid!" Nine! "For the love of Heaven! You used to care for me—"

"Silence!" he said. "One minute more!"

"She flung up her hands and lifted her eyes—and saw me! Eight! She screamed and pointed, and he faced round to me. I raised the club and rushed down upon him. For that one moment I wasn't a coward!"

"Run away!" I called to her. "Run!"

"She sprang between me and him, holding out her arms as if to fend off my blow."

"It's a play!" she cried. "We're rehearsing a play!"

"I didn't believe her at first; but when I saw his face I knew it was true. If he had laughed, I shouldn't have believed her; but he was trying not to laugh!"

"I stood swaying on the last step of the coward's stairs."

"Don't you know?" she cried. "It's the theatricals tomorrow. Did you hear him call me Beatrice? My real name is Evelyn. Surely you know that?"

"I remembered that there was to be a play, and they were hero and heroine. And if every whit of memory had not fled from fright I must have remembered that her name was Evelyn."

I dropped the club. She laughed suddenly—shrieked with laughter. They were a coward's stairs to the end. I fainted.

WHEN I came to I was lying on my bed.

They had carried me there and left me. The door was open. I heard laughter from below; her laugh and his among the others. The rest had returned, and of course they were telling them of my ludicrous attack, like some ignorant peasant who invades the stage to rescue the heroine. That wasn't the worst. I had not been merely ridiculous. I had been so 'frighted by false fires' that I had fainted. I was written down a coward before them all.

"I ended as I'd begun,—ran away like a coward; dressed and crept down a side staircase, and out of a side door. I remembered this train. I ran through hedges and ditches. I had the coward's courage to run, and—here I am. I suppose I'd shoot myself, if I wasn't a coward."

YOU aren't a coward," I pronounced when he had finished. "In your way you are a brave man. Take a nip of brandy."

"Dutch courage!" He laughed bitterly.

"That's exactly where you make the mistake," I said in my professional manner. "You set your courage too hard a task, and then you abuse your courage! The bulk of the deed is done by strength and skill. Courage tackles what's left. You leave yourself too much. You wouldn't want courage to ride a horse, if you'd learned to ride. You'd be much less afraid of a marksman if you could shoot. Well, you had nothing but courage to take you down the stairs that you call a coward's stairs tonight, and it took you down."

"It wasn't courage," he denied. "It was love for a woman."

"Can't that take you up some other stairs?" I suggested.

His face set like the face of a brave man—I know the look. "I was a coward to run away," he cried. "I'll go back again in the morning. I'll tell them that I was unnerved by the struggle I had with myself, and by my fear of their laughter, and that I have come back to be laughed at, and if anyone thinks me a coward, he can propose a test on equal terms."

"Yes," I said; "but don't lay too much stress on the last part. They are English ladies and gentlemen, and they'll laugh very kindly, I think. There is a humorous side to it, you know. I'm glad to have met you. Come and see me when you're back in town. We're going to be friends."

He washed, and I got a brush out of my bag and tidied him up, and lent him a cap. He looked quite bright when we reached town; and then we had a rather pretty addition to this story. A porter came along the train with a telegram, "name of Hastie." That was his name. The telegram said this:

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